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Book review

Pragmática del Orden de Palabras

Xose A. Padilla García, Publicaciones Universidad de Alicante, San Vicente del Raspeig, Alicante, 2005, 234 pages, EUR 20

Spanish constituent ordering has been often characterized as the result of the interplay of discourse-pragmatic, semantic and syntactic factors (cf., e.g. López García, 1996:467). The goal of *Pragmática del Orden de Palabras* (*Pragmatics of Word Order*) is to explain the most relevant features of Spanish constituent order from “a cognitive and functional-pragmatic approach”. The study is within the framework of the ValEsCo Group, the Valencia-based research group involved in the description and explanation of colloquial Spanish from the perspective of discourse and conversation analysis (as an illustrative reference see Briz Gómez, 1998). The book is organized into nine main chapters, besides the Introduction, with a useful summary at the end of each of them, and supplemented with two appendices.

As stated in the Introduction, Padilla García’s (henceforth PG) main starting point is that changes in the position of elements with different syntactic functions in Spanish are motivated by different pragmatic strategies, based on the relations between speaker and hearer. With this assumption in mind, the main aim of the book is to describe the pragmatic strategies that interplay with Spanish constituent order and explain their relation with particular grammatical constructions (p. 24). PG defines *pragmatic strategy* as “a linguistic device used by the speaker to obtain particular linguistic goals” and distinguishes it from *pragmatic intention* (a linguistic act with a rhetorical purpose, like to persuade or convince), although he himself concedes that at times these two notions may overlap (p. 25).

Chapter 1 presents the concept of *basic pattern*, justifying the importance of this concept as starting point in a study of constituent order. GP draws ideas and concepts from two linguistic approaches whose main concern is the *use* of the language: cognitive linguistics and conversational analysis. This chapter also presents the corpus of colloquial conversations¹ used and the main corpus results. The empirical basis for the author’s claims are six conversations selected from the ValEsCo Group Corpus published in 2002 (cf. Briz Gómez and Grupo ValEsCo, 2002), intending to provide a representative sample of both peripheral and prototypical conversations of speakers from different socio-cultural levels and representing different *conversational subtypes* (pp. 33–34).² The last part of Chapter 1 addresses issues of information structure, which for PG (in line with authors such as Halliday) covers two structures: topic-comment and theme–rheme. Although the discussion is generally well documented and clear, there are some minor points of criticism, for example: (a) although the initial position is often associated with the topic, one cannot establish a correlation between the two, as suggested by PG (cf. pp. 52–53), and (b) the concepts of theme and rheme are defined in terms of the hearer, associated with old-new information (cf. p. 51f), but they can also be seen as reflecting a speaker’s choice (cf. Halliday, 1967), e.g. in dealing with segmentation.

Chapter 2 is an approximation to constituent order in terms of cognitive principles. The author proposes here various abstract schemes (in the sense of ‘grammatical patterns’) and sub-schemes that derive from the corpus analysis, differing in terms of constituent order. The idea is that these patterns form networks or chains, some (more specific) patterns (the sub-schemes) being associated with other more general ones. The concept of *construction* is

¹ Colloquial Spanish is seen as the most primary and independent form of the language and where the consequences of constituent order can be best valued when taking into account the grammar-pragmatics interface (p. 32).

² The two appendices at the end of the book provide the reader with some technical information about the selected conversations together with tables deriving from the corpus analysis and their corresponding discussions.

understood in a cognitive sense, as a “complex symbolic unit”, as in Langacker (1999) or Goldberg (1995). The actual performances in the language use will, more or less, approximate to these constructions or abstract patterns. One of the obvious merits of the book derives from the rigorous examination of corpus examples as part of the cognitive linguistics’ assumption of the integration of *use* and *exception* in grammatical description. The nine patterns presented in the book are³: SVO (the most general pattern, but not necessarily the most productive, cf. p. 70); (S)VO (the most frequent pattern in Spanish); VS; topicalization α (TOP α); TOP β ; left dislocation (left-DSL); right dislocation (right-DSL); hybrid TOP/DSL and constructions with simplified syntax. The two first patterns are seen as basic, where SVO is considered an iconic pattern, originating from perceptual and cognitive factors, from which (S)VO is seen to be derived (p. 44). TOPs α – with a scant representation in PG’s corpus – are introduced by a ‘topicalizer’, such as *hablando de* (‘speaking of’) or *en cuanto a* (‘as for’), and are thus distinguished from TOPs β , the most frequent type.

Chapters 3–5 give an account of the pragmatic strategies used by speakers and associated with the schematic patterns introduced in Chapter 2. These chapters constitute, to a great extent, the nucleus of the corpus analysis and contain some of the main arguments put forward in the book. Chapter 3 is concerned with the pragmatic strategies associated with the patterns involving the subject constituent. There are three patterns which Spanish speakers have at their disposal in this respect: providing a preverbal or else postverbal subject, and omitting the subject altogether. To explain the absence or presence of subjects in Spanish, three factors are, in turn, taken into account: whether the utterance contains a mono-valency verb, whether the subject is topicalized, and whether it is a pronominal form. The assumption is that, as Hatcher (1956) already pointed out, certain verbs (basically, mono-valency, intransitive verbs, such as *venir*, ‘to come’, *llegar*, ‘to arrive’) favour a VS order in a “pragmatically neutral situation” and some others (poly-valency, transitive verbs, such as *decir*, ‘to say’, *comprar*, ‘to buy’) favour a SV order in this same type of situation. This correlation may not apply in case the subject needs to be ‘pragmatically emphasized’, and thus ‘topicalized’ (p. 81). Here and elsewhere, PG appears to associate the pragmatic prominence given to an element with its topicalization. It may be clear that a subject that would “normally” appear in a VS pattern can be topicalized by occurring in preverbal position and that this topic status of the subject will imply some sort of pragmatic prominence. However, not in all cases can pragmatic prominence be associated with topicalization (or dislocation) and, conversely, the phenomenon of focus (in its prosodic manifestation or other) does not need to involve topicality in all cases (cf. Dik, 1997:312–313).

Also in relation to the subject position, PG establishes an interesting correlation between pragmatic-conversational strategies and the position of this element. Thus, if the speaker wants to *open new lines of action in the spoken interaction*, s/he will be using a SV order, and if s/he wants to *continue developing the action* s/he will use VS instead. This last order is viewed as a ‘compact cognitive unit’, where the subject is very much an element with no pragmatic importance. At this point, however, a proper consideration of the opposite situation would have been relevant, i.e. when a subject, commonly appearing before the verb, is placed postverbally to acquire some pragmatic prominence related to newness or contrastiveness.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the pragmatic strategies involving TOPs while Chapter 5 discusses pragmatic strategies associated with DSLs. PG sees both patterns as sharing a common pragmatic function, which he somehow vaguely defines as “singling out elements from within the discourse” (p. 109) or “direct the hearer’s attention to a particular segment which wants to be emphasized” (p. 122), leading him to consider DSLs one specific type of TOPs. Another novelty is the distinction between left- and right-TOPs. Right-TOPs do not appear to be easily distinguishable from right-DSLs and indeed PG does not appear to give clear features which would justify that distinction. Further, PG’s definition of DSL (p. 37), mainly based on the presence of the clitic, does not seem to provide a complete picture of this construction in Spanish, by excluding the dislocation of arguments – such as subjects – which do not leave a clitic when its full form is removed.⁴ Criteria such as the presence of the circumstantial element separating the so-called topicalized (or dislocated) subject from the rest of the clause have been considered elsewhere (Downing, 1997; Martínez Caro, 1999) as indicative proof of the dislocated status of the initial subject in this type of construction. Other interesting ideas put forward in Chapters 4 and 5 have to do with the pragmatic strategies associated with TOPs

³ PG takes S, V, and O as the three basic elements of his patterns, since they represent the true nucleus of the sentence, mainly in relation to the typological notion of basic pattern (p. 35). However, greater preciseness in the definition of the syntactic function of object – e.g. do prepositional objects count as objects? – and further discussion on the occurrence of non-object arguments would have been in place at this point.

⁴ Thus, PG’s example (113) on p. 103 could be characterized as a left-DSL:

A: *el autor no recuerdo ahora mismo cómo se llama*

The author I can’t remember right now what *his name* is.

and DSLs. In terms of the newness status of the topicalized or dislocated elements, these tend to be recoverable, either directly or indirectly (e.g. by belonging to a common mental frame), from the preceding context or extralinguistic situation. Right-DSLs often have a summarizing function, especially when the dislocated element is a neuter demonstrative pronoun (p. 117).

Chapter 6 introduces the so-called *constructions with simplified syntax*. These are hybrids between TOPs and DSLs, responding to a struggle between the syntax and the pragmatics (p. 126), whose simplified syntactic form is compensated for by other textual, intonation and extra-linguistic resources. It may seem unjustified to consider these ‘less-prototypical’ constructions as a separate and distinct pattern and indeed to devote a whole chapter to these, especially given that, in statistical terms, they do not represent a significant group of examples in PG’s corpus (p. 130). Admittedly, however, they can be illustrative of how actual language is produced on-line (cf. Geluykens, 1992).

Chapter 7 explores the path from discourse process to grammatical constructions by looking at processes of grammaticalization which have to do with constituent order, basically TOPs and DSLs. PG explores the possible common historic origin of these constructions and their ultimate grammaticalization. The discussion – partially based on Geluykens (1992) – is stimulating and the arguments attractive, though at times these seem to rely more on intuition than on the real corpus findings.

Bridging the gap between the syntax of discourse and the syntax of the sentence, Chapter 8 provides an interesting and useful account of conversation in terms of its basic components and levels, by considering – among other things – the turn as a social unit. Another concern of PG in this chapter is to describe the way these components and levels affect different syntactic constructions, especially, again, TOPs and DSLs. Interestingly, the occurrence of TOPs and DSLs tends to coincide with change or maintenance of turn on the part of the speaker (p. 166), whereby a close association is established between pragmatic strategies and conversational strategies.

Finally, in Chapter 9, PG proposes the establishment of a ‘flexible categorical space’ between the syntactic order and the pragmatic order. The schematic patterns of constituent order described throughout the book and the collection of examples from the conversations are now considered in the light of a continuum of categories which adjust more or less to the prototypical cases.

On the whole, the book is a successful attempt to provide the reader with an interesting and detailed account of Spanish constituent order in colloquial Spanish from a cognitive and conversational perspective. One of its most important merits is the large array of factors considered which affect constituent ordering. It is also a very well documented study with plenty of references on the specific issues, very relevantly presented. It provides interesting results, especially since these derive from the corpus analysis and are thus empirically based. Among the drawbacks, a certain degree of superficiality and vagueness in the discussion of some concepts would be counted. A case in point is the notion of ‘pragmatic emphasis’ or ‘pragmatic singling out’ of elements, used in the characterization of some preverbal subjects, TOPs and DSLs (cf. Chapters 3–5), but which is, however, not explicitly defined.

The book is in general carefully produced and has only few typographical errors throughout the main body of the text. A notable exception to this is, however, the final bibliography, where there are several typos and other inconsistencies. These concern errors in the title of references in English (e.g. p. 218, 224), omission of some authors’ initials (e.g. p. 216, 225), and a few omissions of quoted references in the text (e.g. Bentivoglio, 1987, quoted on p. 34; Cifuentes, 1989, on p. 93), among others. Moreover, the profusion of footnotes, almost in every page throughout the whole text, makes the process of reading less agile and gives the page a less elegant look.

Despite these minor disadvantages, and those mentioned in the discussion of the individual chapters, the book constitutes an innovative addition to the growing body of research on spoken language interaction based on corpus findings. It should certainly be of interest to those concerned with language use in Spanish, and also to those interested in constituent order from a functional-cognitive perspective.

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